



MONEY
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CURRENCIES OF THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

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by Bruno Claessens

At the arrival of the Europeans in the 15th century, iron manufacturing was already common among almost all African cultures. Iron had an important role for a great number of populations in the sub-Saharan region, from Mali to Cameroon and Congo, etc. given the abundance of minerals present on the African continent. In all the African area between the tropics, laterite red soil is common, which is hard rock crust composed of iron hydroxide and aluminum in various proportions, from which Africans obtained iron. Currency tokens made using iron mineral of African origin had an irregular shape due to the mixture of different minerals in the melting pot. After the introduction of iron ingots, bars, and plates imported from European countries, the material became purer and of better quality. The trade of bars, iron and copper ingots had always been intense since remote days, the arrival of Europeans intensified the phenomenon. Consequently, many populations came into possession of the precious metal which were then transformed, by talented and gifted

smiths, into valuable artifacts. Such elegant forms were highly requested, and the single pieces were worth more than the metal used to produce them. In Congo, brass used to be the most precious and requested metal, even more than iron and copper, as it was easy to work and had a strong yellow color that was much appreciated. These metal objects, both for their aesthetical value and the easiness to trade them, were soon passed on from one group and another. In ancient times, a caravan route was used as a commercial road from Western Africa, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin and Nigeria up to Cameroon. The pieces made in one area could be transported to other regions, even if they were distant. This happened regularly with those items which could be worn such as rings, bracelets, anklets and other brass and copper ornaments and, it is therefore sometimes difficult to identify the place of origin of an object. As opposed to classic currencies which, as we know, date from the 7th century BC and originated in the Mediterranean basin among the Lidi,

Greeks who lived in today's Turkey and were the inventory of coinage, each piece of African money is hand made. Each piece is similar to another as far as the form is concerned, however two identical examples do not exist. Maybe in two cases have local smiths pour molten mineral in stamps to produce some Katanga crosses or Nigerian manillas in series. Surprisingly, among African currencies there are no classical round coins. Moreover, the pieces are unmarked, there are no effigies whatsoever nor they have any

other signs showing their belonging to a particular ethnic group. Even during ancient times, when important and powerful kingdoms such as that of Benin, Ife and Kongo ruled, it appears nothing resembling money came from the state.

Marriage dowry of the Zande of Northern Congo, photographed by H. Goldstein, October 1952 (MRAC archives EP.0.0.8782). Still in 1952 these currency pieces could be seen in front of a bride's house as a proof of dowry payment that the groom offered his parents-in-law in order to marry their daughter.



THROWING KNIFE-SHAPED CURRENCIES (KUL)

Anonymous Sara artist

Chad

Iron

Early 20th century

Height: 48 – 48 – 52 cm

Provenance:

Martial Bronsin, Brussels, Belgium, 2000

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,

Belgium, 2000-2025





This strange and original currency originates from groups that live along the Logone River course, in an area between Lake Chad and Lake Tianga. This currency differs from the throwing knives from the region, both in shape that resembles the letter "F" and also in its material: made of wrought iron, it is brittle, thin and very light. Its shape reminds us of stylized human profile, with an oblong head, a long neck, a body, an arm and a leg, all of it in two dimensions only. This archaic shape has been compared to Neolithic cave drawings found in the Tibesti Massif, on the border between Chad and Niger. Josette Rivallain has written about his enigmatic type of currency in her article "Contribution à l'études des groupes Sara Sud du Chad" (Annales de l'Université d'Abidjan, 1981, serie I, tome IX, pp. 23-51): "As currency the *kul* as used for different payments, but not for all, and above all not for tax and duty payments. On the contrary, it played an important role in wedding compensations. It was also used for the redemption of criminals,

in the organization of ceremonies, and as payment for medicines" (p. 38). Rivallain continues: "This currency is called *kul* or *kemb*, was made by the Ngama tribe blacksmiths, wo then distributed it within tribes like the Sara (Kaba, Madjingaye, Nar). These pieces were kept in straw woven baskets and then buried in the earth. A man was able to carry from 200 to 300 pieces on his head. They had a monetary function, above all in marriage contracts. A dowry consisted of several products and services: a certain amount of agricultural ones, yam, millet, peanuts, peas, days of work in the field or the concession of the future mother-in-law as a field-hand, and besides this a payment of 100-250 *kul* delivered in bundles. If the wife died, the husband had to pay in the deceased wife's dowry: at least 25 *kul* plus a goat to her family, and besides this he had to offer gifts to the relatives. All this could cost the husband about 100 *kul*. In those days a slave or a horse could cost 100 *kul*" (p. 39).

ARMLET-SHAPED CURRENCY

Anonymous Igbo artist

Nigeria

Copper alloy

18th-19th century

Length: 29 cm

Provenance:

Emile Deletaille, Brussels, Belgium, 1999

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,

Belgium, 1999-2025



Thick, copper piece wound into a spiral (therefore sometimes called 'coiled manilla') with both ends that are cap screw turned. It comes from excavations in Central Nigeria, in the Igbo-Ukwu region, hence the greenish patina due to the long period it was buried.

Cf. "The Perfect Form", p. 143, 2.12.

BRACELET-SHAPED CURRENCY

Anonymous Igbo artist

Nigeria

Copper alloy

18th-19th century

Dimensions: 12 x 14 cm

Provenance:

Emile Deletaille, Brussels, Belgium, 1999

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,

Belgium, 1999-2025

Cf. "The Perfect Form", p. 142, 2.11.

At the end of the 1700s, the English and Dutch were exporting to Africa, to Old Calabar, big quantities of circular copper bars, about 90 cm long and with a weight of about 570 grams each. The natives used to split them into 3 parts, polish them until they shone like gold, twist them all together like a rope in an incredibly ingenious way. This is how a sort of bracelet was made. Cf. Johansson, "Nigerian currencies", 1967, p. 44. This beautiful bracelet comes from excavations in Central Nigeria, in the Igbo-Ukwu region, hence the greenish patina due to the long period it was buried.





Manillas and torques [ekwe] to be displayed at the Ntin festival held in September at Agwut Obolo in honor of Yok-Obolo, the Obolo tutelary deity. Published in Anderson (Martha G.) and Peek (Philip M.), "Ways of the Rivers: Arts & Environment of the Niger Delta", Los Angeles, UCLA, 2002:55, #1.27. Photo by Keith Nicklin, 1992.

MANILLA-SHAPED CURRENCY

Anonymous Igbo artist

Nigeria

Copper alloy

18th-19th century

Height: 22 cm

Provenance:

Pierre Loos, Brussels, Belgium, 2002

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,
Belgium, 2002-2025



Cf. "The Perfect Form", p. 141, 2.9.

HOE-BLADE-SHAPED CURRENCY (CHU'NPO)

Anonymous Mfumte artist

Cameroon

Iron

Mid 20th century

Height: 72 cm

Provenance:

Martial Bronsin, Brussels, Belgium, 2000

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,

Belgium, 2000-2025

Viviane Baeke wrote how three neighboring villages worked together in a joint venture to produce large quantities of chu'npo for regional trade. Miners from Bibdji (Yulana peoples) excavated high-grade iron ore for smelters to process and forge into bars in the village of Lus (Wuli peoples); these were transferred to Kwadja (Ungpo peoples), where blacksmiths forged them into final shape for distribution as currencies. Respected for their excellent iron, Mambila communities nearby considered chu'npo the highest standard bride wealth a groom could offer as compensation. Cf. "Striking Iron", p. 140, fig. 4.37 and p. 141, fig. 4.38 for a field-photo taken by Baeke in Cameroon in 1980. Cf. "The Perfect Form", p. 157, 2.40.





Kaka funeral in Cameroon, photographed by Thomas Hardie Dalrymple in February 1940. Original photo caption: 'The chief, father of the woman, then produced the dowry, twenty 'shoves' queer shaped bits of iron which are currency here, and a goat, and had a lot to say about the question of whether or not the Juju was in the husband or not. The husband sat at the foot of the bier on which lay the child, in a dejected attitude. In front of the chief are two bundles of grass credited with Juju powers and with which he spat and touched the family of the wife'. Photo source: Cambridge University Library - Royal Commonwealth Society Library (Y3043BB: 293).

HOE-BLADE-SHAPED CURRENCY

Anonymous Chamba

or Mambila artist

Cameroon or Nigeria

Iron

Late 19th century -

Early 20th century

Height: 45 cm

Provenance:

Jan Calmeyn Collection,

Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, - 2025



Cf. "Striking Iron", p. 216, fig. I.4 (as Bamileke).

This type of hoe-currency was made out of a heavy sheet of iron, forged into the shape of a fan, with the bottom part ending in a triangle. Its profile is very slightly bent and the iron surface has very fine brush-made scratches. Cf. "The Perfect Form", p. 156, 2.39 (as Chamba or Mambila).

HOE-BLADE-SHAPED CURRENCY TOKEN

Anonymous Chamba

or Mambila artist

Cameroon or Nigeria

Iron

Late 19th century -

Early 20th century

Height: 26 cm

Provenance:

Martial Bronsin, Brussels, Belgium, 2000

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,

Belgium, 2000-2025



Cf. "The Perfect Form", p. 161, 2.48.

CURRENCY TOKENS

Anonymous Idoma artist

Nigeria

Iron

Early 20th century

Height: 81 cm – 71 cm – 80 cm

Provenance:

Martial Bronsin, Brussels, Belgium, 2000

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,

Belgium, 2000-2025



Cf. "The Perfect Form", p. 162, 2.50.

CURRENCY TOKEN (TAJERE/LOSOL)

Anonymous Fulani artist

Nigeria

Iron

Early 20th century

Length: 28 cm

Provenance:

Jan Calmeyn Collection,

Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, -2025

Cf. "Striking Iron", p. 93, 3.13.

These forged iron bards were still in use until the Second World War among the Fulani, Jukun, and Mumuye cultures. Among the Jukun, in the early 1900s, one

hundred losol were needed to buy a
Cf. "The Perfect Form", p. 149, 223.



CURRENCY BAR (TAJERE, SAKA)

Anonymous Mumuye artist

Nigeria

Iron

Early 20th century

Length: 41 cm

Provenance:

Jan Calmeyn Collection,

Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, -2025



Cf. "Striking Iron", p. 25, P1.3A-B.

Cf. "The Perfect Form", p. 149, 2.23.

CURRENCY TOKEN

Anonymous Mumuye artist

Nigeria

Iron

Early 20th century

Height: 27 cm

Provenance:

Emile Deletaille, Brussels, Belgium, 1999

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,

Belgium, 1999-2025

This type comes from Eastern Nigeria, from groups who live in the region crossed by the Taraba River. The currency is a big circular iron bar with its extremities worked to form a zoomorphic shape.

Cf. "The Perfect Form", p. 153, 2.32.



INSIGNIA OF OFFICE (BAAN DAKA)

Anonymous Chamba artist

Nigeria

Iron

Mid 20th century

Height: 39 cm

Provenance:

Jan Calmeyn Collection,

Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, -2025

This ceremonial hoe blade with long handle was forged in one piece with delicate flourishes at the edge of the blade's base and finely chiseled designs on its handle. These elaborations are evidence of the blacksmith's skill and the transformative process that turn a basic tool into an insignia of office. Cf. "Striking Iron", p. 447, fig. 0.6. Cf. "The Perfect Form", p. 175, 2.74 (as Mambila or Chamba).

Among Chamba, forged iron objects were costly, labor-intensive to reproduce, and essential to many activities, together

with medicines and sacrifices. Women's initiation associations possessed iron paraphernalia too. Leaders of jeem (as the association was called) carried upright all-iron, long-handled staffs quite distinct from functional tools but said to be elaborate versions of ancient hoes. Their form culminates in an asymmetrically shaped spade blade that served as insignia of office (baan daka). The incorporation of hoe blades into activities of jeem linked women, with iron as an intermediary, to agricultural fertility and reproduction generally. Cf. Marla Berns in "Striking Iron", p. 446.



HOE-SHAPED CURRENCY TOKEN

Anonymous Chamba or Mambila artist

Nigeria or Cameroon

Iron

Early 20th century

Height: 31,5 cm

Provenance:

Jan Calmeyn Collection,

Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, -2025



Cf. "The Perfect Form", p. 175, 2.74.

KISSI PENIES

Kissi pennies
Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea
Early 20th century
Iron
Various sizes

Provenance:
Duende Art Projects,
Antwerp, Belgium, 2025





Kissi pennies are made from iron and take their name from the Kissi people of modern-day Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea. Kissi pennies were made by smiths in the form of long rods, at one end was a rounded flat section called the head. At the other end, called the foot, the coin had two points that you could visualize as being real feet. They ranged in length from about 15 cm to as long as 40 cm. It is believed that the shape was intended to display the quality of the iron used to create them. The shape showed that the iron could be twisted, hammered, sharpened into a blade, and fashioned into points. Kissi pennies were primarily used in West Africa in the first half of the twentieth century. Individual Kissi pennies could be used to make small purchases, a score of oranges or a bunch of bananas could be bought for two. Because each one had relatively small value, they were often gathered into bundles (usually of 20). Prices compiled in the early twentieth century, for example put the cost of a cow at 100

bundles, while a bride price might be 200 bundles, and slaves could sell for 300 bundles. Kissi pennies were used until colonial powers discontinued their use as currency, but continued to hold significance in various religious ceremonies in some areas of the region, for example, as tokens of completing rituals in the Poro and Sande Societies; as bride wealth, and also to be placed on tombs and graves, where they were believed to channel the souls of the dead. At some point, the currency acquired spiritual aspects, perhaps because of its use in graves, and as a result, when a penny broke it was considered without value until it got repaired it in a special ceremony. It was this feature that led to it being called "money with a soul". European travelers regarded them as a curious form of African money, and as a result many were collected and deposited in museums. The present group is presented upright on a custom-made base to create a small forest of money.

CURRENCY TOKEN (MANDJONG)

Anonymous Kwele artist

Gabon

Iron

Early 20th century

Height: 48 cm

Provenance:

Martial Bronsin, Brussels, Belgium, 2000

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,

Belgium, 2000-2025

The Kwele considered the mandjong objects as prestigious and used them in payment of the bride-price and for marriage contracts. In 1935, up to 100 mandjong could have been asked for in a marriage contract. The oval appendixes situated on the wings are perpendicular to the currency's two-dimensional plan, appearing to be stretching towards the third dimension. These appendixes could be taken off a single pieces and spent as a fraction of the entire coin. The form of this model, which perhaps derives from a hoe, reminds of a ship's anchor, or a swallow, or a tropical plant leaf: whatever it is, its shape is considered to be one of the most elegant forms ever to have been made by an

African smith's hands. Cf. "The Perfect Form", p. 228, 4.28. An interesting study dedicated to the mandjong was written by Jeanne Françoise Vincent: "Dot et monnaie de fer chez les Bakwele et les Djem" (in *Objects et Mondes: la revue du Musée de l'Homme*, Tome III, fasc. 4, Paris, 1963). Tom Joyce has suggested that Kwele smiths achieved a deliberate aesthetic resonance with an important type of wooden masks. Cf. "Striking Iron", p. 162, fig. 5.13. Cf. Collection Musée Barbier-Mueller, Genève, Switzerland (#1019-79) for a very similar example (published in: "Monnaies - Objets d'échange", by Vanderstraete (Anne), Genève: Musée Barbier-Mueller, 2016:31, fig.18 & 167, #61).



SPEAR-BLADE-SHAPED CURRENCY (LIGANDA DOA)

Anonymous Topoke or Lokele artist

D.R. Congo

Iron

Early 20th century

Height: 164 cm

Provenance:

Lucien Van de Velde, Antwerp, 2000

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,

Belgium, 2000-2025

This spectacular currency, considered an unlikely spear, was created thanks to the creativity of Topoke blacksmiths, living in the Kisangani region. These were in use until 1920, also among other groups in the region. Made of iron plate, with variable dimensions ranging from 140 to 200 cm, they had quite a strong purchase power in the past. Emil Torday wrote that 30 doa bought 1 slave, 20 doa a 20 meter canoe, and 40 to 50 one wife. (Torday, 1910, p. 202). Topoke smiths showed great ability in making them. They welded two pieces of iron plate. Having obtained the desired form, they made a series of incisions along the piece on its left side, parallel to its profile, using a scalpel. They then would repeat the whole process on the other side" so that the two faces would become identical; in the end they would

finish the lower part with a cylindrical extension in which one could insert a wooden pole, or stick the coin into the ground. Cf. "The Perfect Form", p. 282, 5.51. A masterfully produced currency token such as this – taller than a man and produced by a team of smiths – represented community wealth and well-being. As a young man prepared for marriage, his family would negotiate with his bride's to decide bride wealth that could include impressive devices like this. Such 'material praise' would acknowledge the love, nurturing, household management, and labor that the woman would bring to her husband's family. Her own family could then deploy the same tokens to secure marriages of their own young men. Cf. "Striking Iron", p. 154, fig. 5.3.



Topoke men holding large spear-blade-shaped currency tokens representing wealth and authority and used in important exchanges like bride wealth, ransoming captives taken in battle, and offering deference to political superiors. The tokens were banned by the Belgian government in the 1920s as Congolese people were obliged to earn colonial francs to pay taxes, thus boosting the colonial economy. Photography by Emil Torday, 1907-1909. Illustrated in "Striking Iron", p. 155, fig. 5.4



ANKLET-SHAPED CURRENCY

Anonymous Mbole artist

D.R. Congo

Copper alloy

Early 20th century

Height: 23 cm

Provenance:

Noir d'Ivoire, Paris, France, September 1999

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,

Belgium, 1999-2025

These wonderful spherical copper rings, flattened and open on one side, were used as anklets as well as money in commercial transactions between peoples of central Congo who live in the equatorial region surrounded by the Kasai, Sankuru and Lomami rivers such as the Mbole, Jonga, Hamba and Nkutshu. In order to make this currency, the blacksmith takes a rectangular copper plate 3-4 mm thick and hammers it until he obtains a ring, which was then sealed by additional hammering and reheating of the copper. Cf. "The Perfect Form", p. 288, 5.58.





This old field-photo shows a high rank Mbole man photographed with all his wives. He is wearing two copper anklets and holding a spear-shaped currency in his right hand. The woman on the right seems to have the role of the 'first wife' among the wives, as she is the only one to be wearing both anklets. The other women possibly played a subordinate role as they only wear a single anklet, a sign of a lower rank in the hierarchy. Cf. "The Perfect Form", p. 289 – photo source unknown, from the archives of Jan Elsen, probably around photographed around the middle of the 20th century.

CURRENCY (ONGONDA)

Anonymous Jonga or Hamba artist

D.R. Congo

Copper alloy

Early 20th century

Height: 15 cm – Length: 29 cm

Provenance:

Pierre Loos, Brussels, Belgium, 2002

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,

Belgium, 2002-2025



A curved copper bar with the extremities in the shape of a nail head, the profiles featuring dentils. This type was used by several groups from the Congo and Ubangi basin, and used in marriage transactions or to access a society. Cf. "The Perfect Form", p. 290, 5.59.

CURRENCY (BOLOKO)

Anonymous Nkutshu
or Basongo Meno artist
D.R. Congo
Copper alloy
Early 20th century
Height: 37 & 43 cm

Provenance:
Jan Calmeyn Collection,
Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, -2025

A copper rod hand manufactured with around 1 cm section and thin, blunt, disc-like extremities. This strange U-shaped copper currency was made by the Nkutshu blacksmiths for their monetary system. They were also giving it to their neighbors, the Basongo Meno, a group of Mongo origins, in exchange for copper mineral. The Basongo Meno considered them important objects used both in dowry payment and in the purchase of slaves and big animals. Cf. "The Perfect Form", p. 295, 5.65. Alfred Mahieu wrote in 1924 ("Numismatique du Congo 1485-1924", p. 31) that one boloko would buy a billy goat, two were worth 1 goat or a man slave, 3 a female slave, and 10 boloko constituted a normal dowry for a wife.



CURRENCY

Anonymous Ngombe artist

D.R. Congo

Copper alloy

Early 20th century

Height: 12 cm – Length: 52 cm

Provenance:

Pierre Loos, Brussels, Belgium, 2002

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,

Belgium, 2002-2025



Solid curved egg-shaped section copper bar with blunt-ended extremities. It belongs to a series of bar currencies that was common among various forms in the central regions of Congo. Cf. "The Perfect Form", p. 329, 5.110.

CURRENCY

Anonymous Luba artist

D.R. Congo

Copper alloy

14th – 16th century

Height: 12 cm

Provenance:

Jan Calmeyn Collection,

Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, -2025



A small copper currency commonly known as "Katanga cross". It is a typical unconventional African currency with ancient origins: several examples were found in tombs from the 14th century. The green copper patina is typical of excavated objects.

CURRENCY

Anonymous Luba artist

D.R. Congo

Copper alloy

19th century -

Early 20th century

Height: 28 cm

Provenance:

Jan Calmeyn Collection,

Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, -2025

This type of currency, also known as Katanga cross, was greatly diffused in the Shagba region although it was used in all of Equatorial Africa, up to the coasts of Angola. Emil Torday wrote they were in use among the Sungu, a southern subgroup of the Tetela and indicated their local name and commercial value: 1 In'Na for 8 yards of fabric, 3 N'Na for a goat, 3-5 N'Na for a male slave, 5-10 N'Na for a female slave. Many different types, shapes and weights were in use. This example has a relief rib in the central section.



CURRENCY

Anonymous Luba artist

D.R. Congo

Copper alloy

19th century -

Early 20th century

Height: 24 cm

Provenance:

Jan Calmeyn Collection,

Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, -2025

A Katanga cross also called a handa, is a cast copper ingot in the shape of an equal-armed cross which was once used as a form of currency in pre-colonial Congo. Katanga crosses were made in various sizes, typically about 20 centimeters across, and weighing about 1 kilogram. Sometimes several examples were bound together with fiber. The name derives from Katanga, a rich copper mining region in the south-eastern portion of the D.R. Congo. These X-shaped ingots were cast by local coppersmiths by pouring molten copper into sand molds.



THAT
AIN'T
NO MONEY
HONEY!

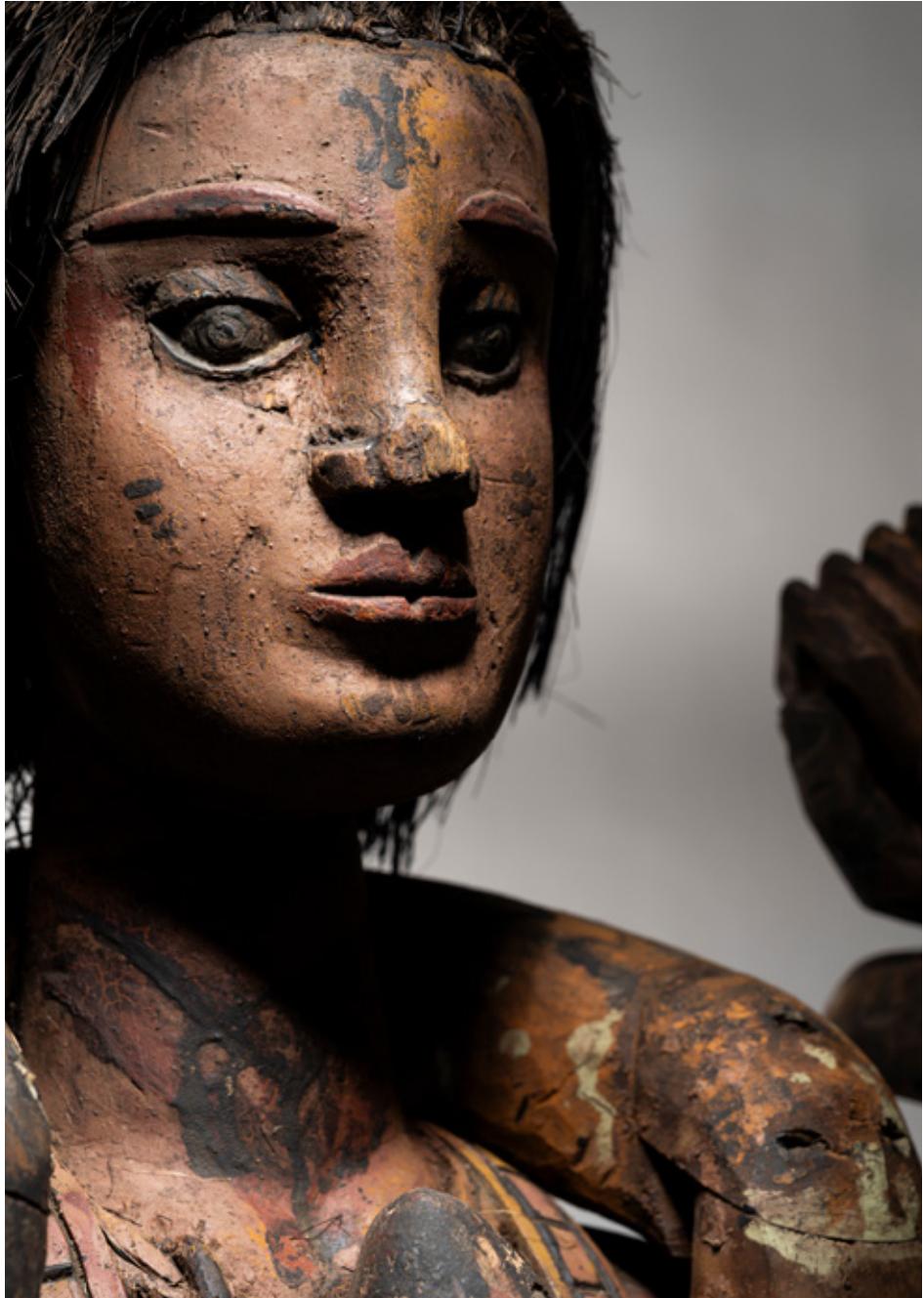


MAMMY WATA HEADDRESS

Akpan Chukwu of Utu Etim Ekpo, Abak
(Annang peoples) or another member
of the Chukwu family
Nigeria
Mid 20th century
Wood, fibers
height 82 cm

Provenance:

Private Collection, Côtes d'Armor, France
Karl Benz, Plérin, 7 July 2023, lot 329
Duende Art Projects, Antwerp, Belgium, 2023



Art's inspiration easily crosses borders, across space and time, the present exceptional 'Mami Wata' headdress being a perfect example. For too long African material cultures have been considered as closed systems without any outside influences; yet the origin of their inspirations, as we will see, can go way beyond the usual. 'Mami Wata' is such a unique pan-African phenomenon with a long and global history. The artist who carved this magnificent Igbo headdress from Nigeria was inspired by a then 50-year-old German postcard of an Indian snake charmer active in Hamburg and abroad in the 1890s. The iconography struck a chord and was explicitly copied in a syncretic iconographic

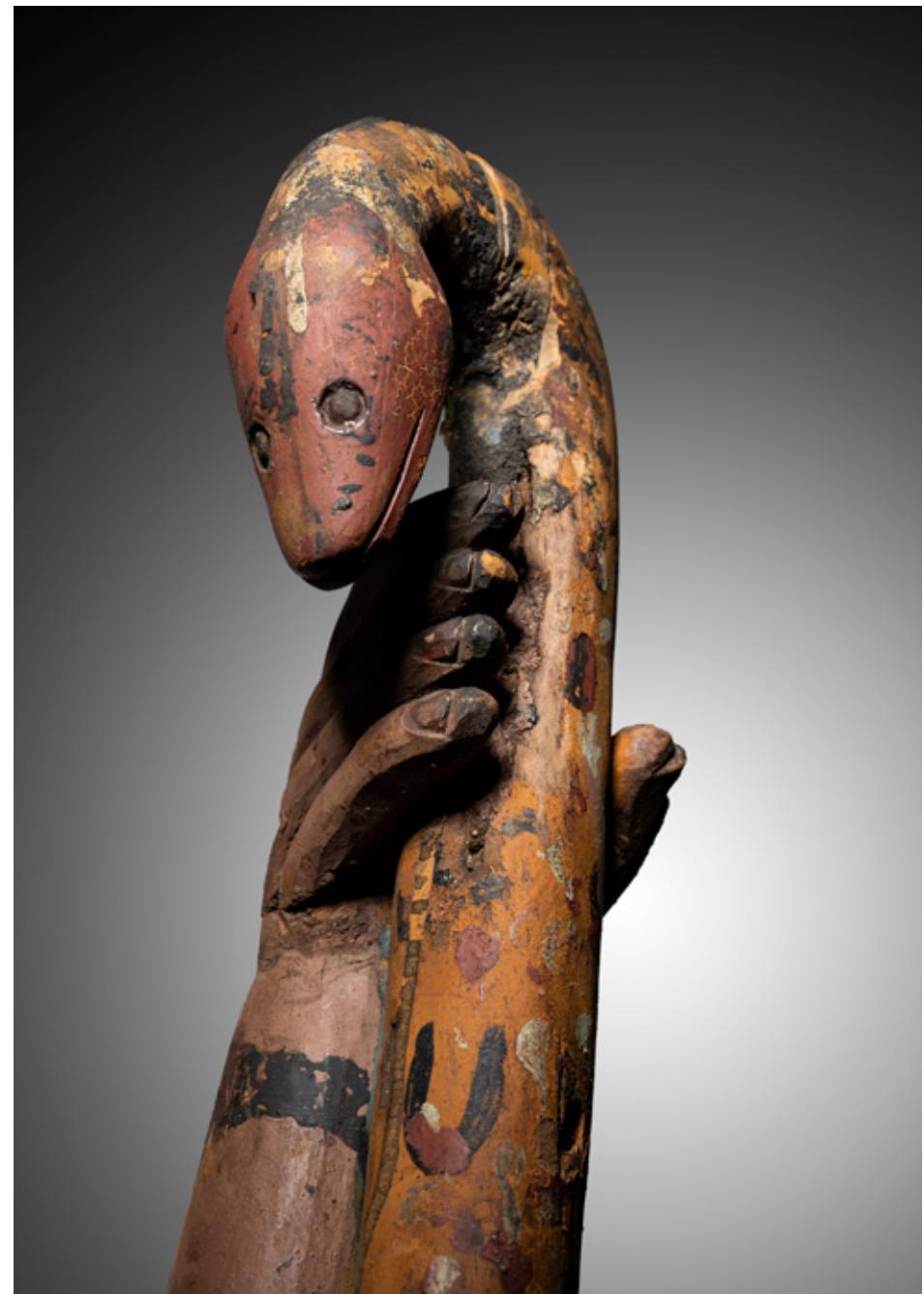
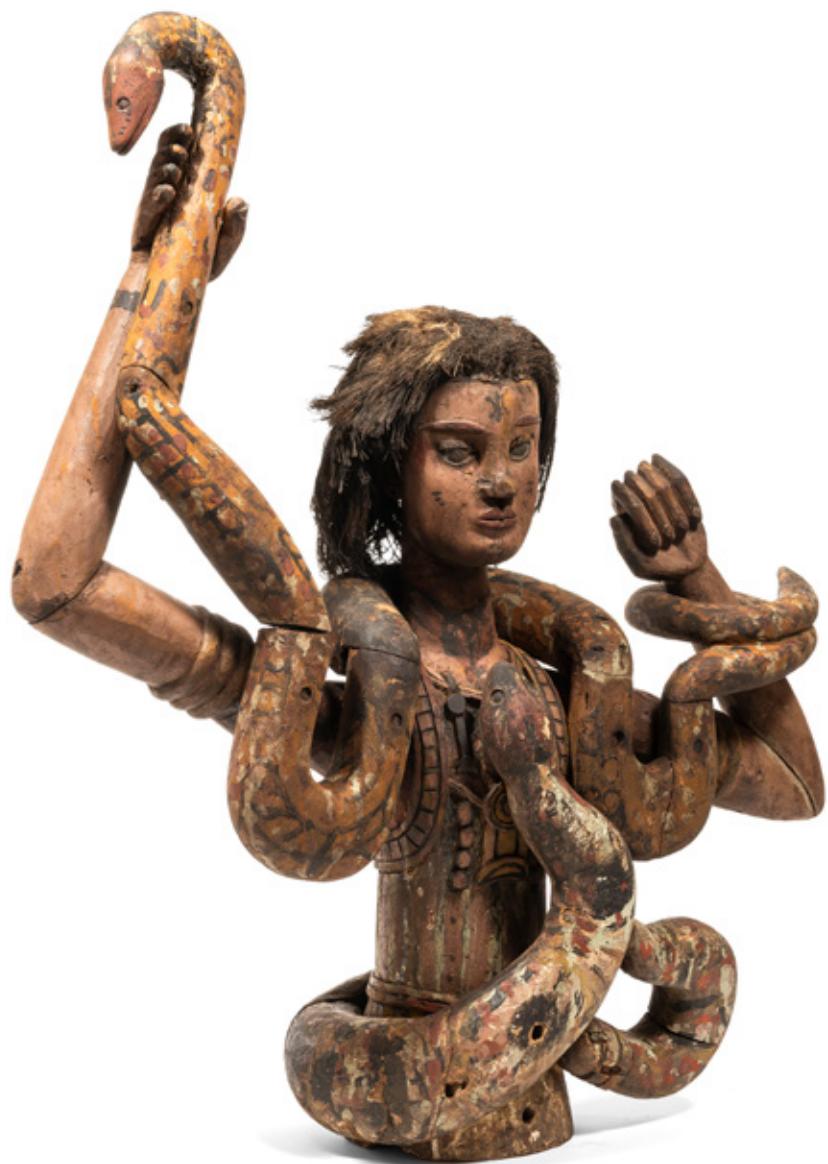
style, blending Igbo stylistic elements with the outside influence. The theme of Mami Wata, appears in myriad forms, including mermaid and snake charmers, with varying devotional practices through sub-Saharan Africa. Henry John Drewal's 2008 publication "Mami Wata – Arts for Water Spirits in African and Its Diaspora", coinciding with an exhibition at the Fowler Museum at UCLA in Los Angeles, gives an excellent overview of this phenomenon.

'Mami Wata', which can be translated as 'Mother Water', is in fact pidgin English. She is said to bring good fortune in the form of money. Her powers, however, extend far beyond

economic gain. Although for some she indeed bestows good fortune and statuaries through monetary wealth, for others, she aids in concerns related to procreation (infertility, impotence, or infant mortality). Mami Wata also provided a spiritual and professional avenue for women to become powerful priestesses and healers of both psycho-spiritual and physical ailments and to assert female agency in a generally male-dominated societies. Henry Drewal called her a multivocal, multifocal symbol with so many resonances that she feeds the imagination, generating, rather than limiting, meanings and significances: nurturing mother; sexy mama; provider of riches; healer of physical and

spiritual ills; embodiment of dangers and desires, risks and challenges, dreams and aspirations, fears and forebodings. People were attracted to the seemingly limitless possibilities she represents, and at the same time frightened by her destructive potential. She inspired a vast array of emotions, attitudes, and actions among those who worshipped her, those who fear her, those who study her, and those who create works of art about her. What the Yoruba people say about their culture is also applicable to the histories and significances of Mami Wata: she is like 'a river that never ends'. (op. cit., p. 25).





SWORD

Anonymous Gbaya artist

Central African Republic

Iron, brass, wood, leather

Late 19th century -

Early 20th century

Height: 53 cm

Provenance:

Jan Calmeyn Collection,

Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, -2025





SICKLE KNIFE (UGGO)

Anonymous Momvu artist

D.R. Congo

Iron, wood

Late 19th century -

Early 20th century

Height: 52 cm

Provenance:

René Vanderstraete, Lasne,

Belgium, January 2003

Jan Calmeyn Collection,

Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, 2003-2025

Cf. "Striking Iron", p. 226, fig. II.10



BIRD-HEADED KNIFE (OSELE)

Anonymous Kota artist

Gabon

Iron, brass, wood

Early 20th century

Height: 33 cm

Provenance:

René Vanderstraete, Lasne,

Belgium, October 2002

Jan Calmeyn Collection,

Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, 2002-2025



SHORT SWORD (BANGO)

Anonymous Lobala or Ngbaka artist

D.R. Congo

Iron, brass, wood

Late 19th century -

Early 20th century

Height: 56 cm

Provenance:

Jan Calmeyn Collection,

Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, -2025

Cf. "Striking Iron", p. 227, fig. II.11



A young Ngombe woman photographed by August Bal in January 1936 in Bomboma, a village between the Giri and the Ubangi. She holds special parade knives and would travel from village to village to receive gifts. The white paint around her mouth signified that her newborn was healthy. Bal's original caption: "Young mother on tour to receive gifts. Bomboma." Jan Elsen has suggested both knives were part of her dowry. Cf. "The Perfect Form", p. 337 and p. 342.

SWORD

Anonymous Yakoma artist

D.R. Congo

Iron, brass, wood

Late 19th century -

Early 20th century

Height: 44 cm

Provenance:

Jan Calmeyn Collection,

Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, -2025





BRACELET

Anonymous artist

Niger

Stone

Neolithic

Height: 15 cm

Provenance:

Michel Van den Dries, Gavere, Belgium

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,

Belgium, -2025



ANTHROPOMORPHIC BELL

Anonymous Lower Niger Artist

Nigeria

Copper Alloy

19th century or earlier

Height: 18,5 cm

Provenance:

Martial Bronsin, Brussels, Belgium, 2018

Private Collection, Brussels, Belgium, 2018-2025

A very similar Lower Niger bell is held
by the Royal Museum for Central Africa,
Tervuren, Belgium (#EO.1979.21.5).

SHIELD (KARMIN)

Anonymous Kirdi artist

Cameroon

Iron, cloth

Mid 20th century

Height: 54 cm

Provenance:

Justin Barthels, Maastricht, The Netherlands

Duende Art Projects, Antwerp, Belgium

Cf. "Striking Iron", p. 343, fig. 13.35a-b
for an iron Fali shield also covered with
lines of lavish, cold-punched bumps in a
beautiful design formation. Such an iron
shield was a prized cultural heirloom
because of its use in activities associated
with key social transitions, for example
male initiation, and its former role in
battle.





RAIN WAND

Anonymous Mumuye artist

Nigeria

Iron

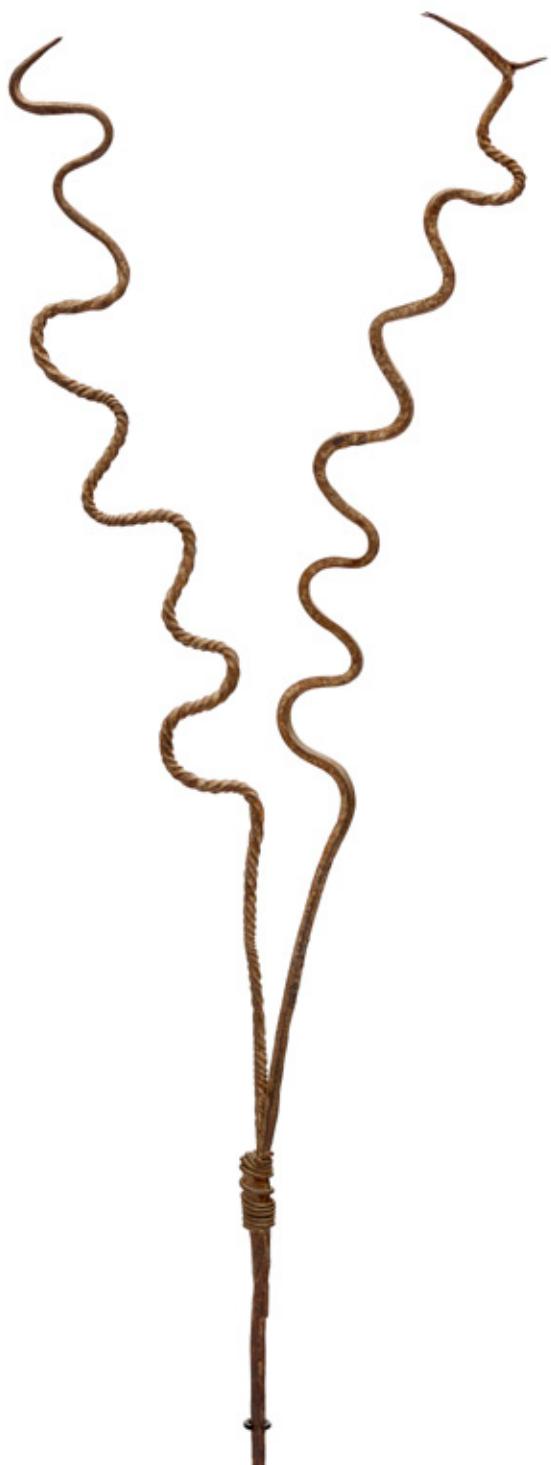
Early 20th century

Height: 45 cm

Provenance:

Jan Calmeyn Collection,

Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, -2025



Sinuous iron rods used by Mumuye rainmakers evoke rivulets of running water, the flash of lightning, and the movements of snakes that forecast the coming of rain.
Cf. "Striking Iron", p. 93, 3.13.

FIGURE

Anonymous Senufo artist

Ivory Coast

Copper Alloy

Early 20th century

Height: 4,5 cm

Provenance:

Lucien Van de Velde, Antwerp, Belgium, 2000

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas, Belgium,
2000-2025





FIGURE

Anonymous Kulango artist

Ivory Coast

Copper Alloy

Early 20th century

Height: 4 cm

Provenance:

Jan Calmeyn Collection,
Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, -2025





LIZARD

Anonymous Lobi artist

Burkina Faso

Copper alloy

Early 20th century

Height: 11,5 cm

Provenance:

Jacques Blanckaert, Ukkel, Belgium, 1994

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,
Belgium, 1994-2025



PROTECTIVE SNAKE

Anonymous Gan artist

Burkina Faso

Copper alloy

19th century

Height: 29 cm

Provenance:

Hélène Leloup, Paris, France, 2003

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,
Belgium, 2003-2025



WOMAN'S PUBLIC APRON (MOTSOD YAM)

Anonymous Mafa artist

Cameroon

Iron, leather, cordon cordage

Mid 20th century

Height: 14 cm

Provenance:

Sofie Van Assche, Ghent, Belgium

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,
Belgium, -2025

Comprised of a cluster of finely forged iron strips held together in a tight triangle, a Mafa woman's motsod yam is worn point down and facing away from the body, in these societies, iron is closely associated with adult women's fertility.

Cf. "Striking Iron", p. 322, fig. 13.9



ANKLET / RATTLE

Anonymous Yoruba artist

Nigeria

Copper alloy

19th century

Height: 18 cm

Provenance:

Lucien Van de Velde, Antwerp, Belgium, 1984

Willem Vranken, Dilbeek, Belgium

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,

Belgium, -2025

Another anklet from this workshop is published in: Stoll (Mareidi & Gert), Galerie Schwarz-Weiss, Munich, 1981, #35



DIVINER'S BAG (APO IFA)

Anonymous Yoruba artist

Nigeria

Beads, fibers, cloth

Early 20th century

Height: 27 cm

Provenance:

Hélène Leloup, Paris, France

Jan Calmeyn Collection,

Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, -2025





The most emblematic and personalized accessory of a Yoruba diviner (babalawo) is his apo Ifa, a beaded leather bag featuring brilliant adornment that is not merely decorative but constitutes a commentary on his vocation through its materials and color scheme. Dedicated to the perpetual pursuit of knowledge, diviners lead a peripatetic existence, making themselves available as advisers and seeking out renowned colleagues whose wisdom and talent might expand their own understanding. In view of their itinerant way of life, Yoruba babalawo have been compared

to artists and are described as "travelers who are strangers everywhere, at home nowhere." Their mobility and freedom to practice their profession anywhere are facilitated by a portable set of divining implements, which includes palm nuts (opele Ifa), a tray (opon Ifa), a tapper (iroke Ifa), and a small ivory head symbolic of the god Esu (also called Elegba). These are carried in the apo Ifa, the outer flap of which may be decorated with cowrie shells or imported European beads. The fundamental importance of the apo diviner's way of life is indicated by the epithet akapo ("carriers of bags").



Four Yoruba men, the diviner with dotted body paint and holding two fly whisks, seated behind an Ifa divination tray and other items among which two opon ifa. Photographed by Edward Harland Duckworth in Ife in the 1930s. Collection Herskovits Library of African Studies, Northwestern University Libraries (#ark:/81985/n2nc5vr7j).

FIGURE

Anonymous Lobi artist

Burkina Faso

Wood

Early 20th century

Height: 11 cm

Provenance:

Renaud Vanuxem, Paris, France, 2022

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,
Belgium, 2022-2025





FIGURE (MU'PO)

Anonymous Bamileke artist

Cameroon

Wood, leather, fibers, copper alloy

Early 20th century

Height: 10 cm

Provenance:

Alain Bovis, Paris, France, 2016

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,
Belgium, 2016-2025





MINIATURE SLIT DRUM

Anonymous Bamileke artist

Cameroon

Wood, fibers

Early 20th century

Height: 16 cm

Provenance:

Max Granick, New York City, NY, USA

Jacques Germain, Montreal, Canada, 2012

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,

Belgium, 2012-2025





MINIATURE MASK

Anonymous Dan artist

Liberia

Wood, sacrificial patina

Early 20th century

Height: 16,5 cm

Provenance:

Private Collection, UK

Owen Hargreaves, London, UK

Duende Art Projects, Antwerp,
Belgium, 2024





JANUS FIGURE

Anonymous Hemba artist

D.R. Congo

Wood, sacrificial material

Early 20th century

Height: 21 cm

Provenance:

Jacques Blanckaert, Ukkel, Belgium, 1995

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,

Belgium, 1995-2025

Published in:

Neyt (François), "La Grande Statuaire

Hemba du Zaïre", Louvain-La-Neuve, 1977,

p. 484, fig. 79-80-81





ANTHROPOMORPHIC DOOR LOCK

Anonymous Bamana artist

Mali

Wood

Early 20th century

Height: 45,5 cm

Provenance:

André Schoeller, Paris, France

Sotheby's, Paris, 12 December 2012. Lot 49.

Etude J.J. Mathias-Baron Ribeyre- E.

Farrando, Paris, "Collection André Schoeller",

22 December 2014. Lot 96.

Renaud Vanuxem, Paris, France

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,

Belgium, -2025







FIGURE

Anonymous Lobi artist

Burkina Faso

Wood

Mid 20th century

Height: 52 cm

Provenance:

Piet Blanckaert, Knokke, Belgium, 1989

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,

Belgium, 1989-2025



FIGURE

Anonymous Lobi artist

Burkina Faso

Wood

Mid 20th century

Height: 54 cm

Provenance:

Johan Henau, Antwerp, Belgium

Jan Calmeyn Collection,

Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, -2025



FACE MASK

Anonymous Mano artist

Ivory Coast

Wood, iron

Mid 20th century

Height: 22 cm

Provenance:

Johan Henau, Antwerp, Belgium, 1987

Jacques Blanckaert, Ukkel, Belgium, 1987-1991

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,

Belgium, 1991-2025



FIGURE

Anonymous Tchamba artist

Togo

Wood

Early 20th century

Height: 60 cm

Provenance:

Hélène Leloup, Paris, France, 2003

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,
Belgium, 2003-2025

BOARD GAME

Anonymous Oromo or Gurage artist

Ethiopia

Wood

Mid 20th century

Height: 45 cm

Provenance:

Jan Calmeyn Collection,

Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, -2025

Mancala is a two-player turn-based strategy board game played with small stones, beans, or seeds and rows of holes or pits in the earth, a board or other playing surface. The objective is usually to capture all or some set of the opponent's pieces. Versions of the game date back past the 3rd century and evidence suggests the game existed in Ancient Egypt. It is among the oldest known games to still be widely played today. Among other early evidence of the game are fragments of a pottery board and several rock cuts found in Aksumite areas in Matara (in Eritrea) and Yeha (in Ethiopia), which are dated by archaeologists to between the 6th and 7th centuries AD.





PAIR OF GRAIN SCOOPS

Anonymous Oromo artist

Ethiopia

Wood

Mid 20th century

Height: 116 & 102 cm

Provenance:

Simonis, Düsseldorf, Germany, August 2003,

Jan Calmeyn Collection, Sint-Niklaas,

Belgium, 2003-2025

Previous Exhibitions

2024 [AKAA](#), Also Known as Africa Art Fair, Paris, France

2024 [Unveiled](#), Parcours des Mondes, Paris, France

2024 [Eye of the Collector](#), London, United Kingdom

2024 [A Flock of Birds](#), Civilisations Art Fair, Brussels, Belgium

2024 [The Gift](#), Antwerp, Belgium

2024 [Echoes II](#), Antwerp, Belgium

2024 [The World is Dancing a Masquerade](#), Antwerp, Belgium

2024 [Invocations](#) by Sibusiso Ngwazi, Antwerp, Belgium

2024 [Mini-Mania](#), Civilisations Art Fair, Brussels, Belgium

2023 [PAN](#), Amsterdam, The Netherlands

2023 [Echoes](#), Knokke-Heist, Belgium

2023 [Savoir-Faire](#), Parcours des Mondes, Paris, France

2023 [Alliances](#) by Hadassa Ngamba, Antwerp, Belgium

2023 [Transient Beings](#), Antwerp, Belgium

2023 [Je ne sais quoi](#), African art with a surreal twist, Antwerp, Belgium

2023 [A World Unheard](#) by Raymond Fuyana, Antwerp, Belgium

2023 [The Blind Side](#) by Sibusiso Ngwazi, Antwerp, Belgium

2023 [Manifestations](#), Antwerp, Belgium

2023 [Pathfinder](#) by Mostaff Muchawaya, Antwerp, Belgium

2022 [Living with Art](#), Duende Magazine, online exhibition

2022 [Van Strien Collection](#), PAN, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

2022 [Sweet Dreams](#), Parcours des Mondes, Paris, France

2022 [Unsettled](#), Zwartusters Monastery, Antwerp, Belgium

2021 [Threads](#), Zwartusters Monastery, Antwerp, Belgium

Duende Art Projects was founded in Antwerp, Belgium in 2021 by Bruno Claessens, previously the European director of the African art department at Christie's Paris. A passionate art expert with 15 years of ample experience in the African art market, Claessens has published four books on classical African art: Ere Ibeji (2013), Baule Monkeys (2016), UNÙ (2021) & Shared Passion (2023). Throughout his career, he gained a profound knowledge of art of the African continent, both classical and contemporary, and has developed a great network of collectors, curators, and scholars as well as strong institutional ties.

Duende Art Projects' ambition is to inspire people by sharing our profound passion for the art of the African continent. Our purpose is to strengthen Africa's visibility and significance within the global and diverse art world through a strong digital presence and frequent curated exhibitions on unique locations. The gallery wishes to open up the western-dominated perspective in the art world, and offers a well-rounded and fresh take on African art, both classical and contemporary. Establishing strategic collaborations with other galleries and institutions worldwide, it wishes to create opportunities to support and promote art and artists from the African continent.



Duende is a Spanish word that is difficult to translate; it is a concept related to flamenco, referring to a magical moment of inspiration and genius. It is the heightened state of emotion when encountering a moving work of art, a sudden experience that can't be captured, a goosebumps moment. While Spanish in origin, the word has an African ring to it - indeed it is a universal concept, and indicative of the gallery's ambitions. Duende Art Projects goes beyond labels and reveals the art's multiplicity of layers. Duende Art Projects' values are more than just words. We live our values and believe that galleries with a strong culture and a higher goal do better. Our values are to be genuine, personal, responsible and open-minded. We pursue growth and learning, embrace and drive change through innovation, are passionate and determined, and aim to create both inspirational as joyous moments while offering premium quality artworks.

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